

Strategyland

■ BUILDING THE PERFECT FANTASY PITCHING STAFF 2015

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Last year, in the offseason, I did an analysis of fantasy baseball pitching staffs based on the 2013 season. My prices were based on leagues playing Rotisserie format 5x5, AL or NL only, but the findings could be applied to any style of play.

This article is not made of magic beans. It is not some formula you can follow blindly, but it does have some data that should help you think better about which pitchers you want on your staff, and why.

FIRST QUESTION? HOW RELIABLE ARE PITCHERS?

I broke pitchers down into three groups, then looked at how much each group cost in 2014 and how much they earned on average. NET is how much profit they made or lost as a group.

SET	COST	EARNED	NET
>\$20	\$25	\$27	+\$2
>\$10 and <\$18	\$14	\$14	\$0
<\$5	\$2	-\$4	-\$6

I look at this and my first reaction is to buy expensive pitchers, because they're most reliable, right?

But alas, there is a problem.

HOW MANY \$25 PITCHERS CAN YOU AFFORD?

An average Roto league spends about 30 percent of its budget on pitching. That's about \$80. You can do the math, but it might help if I point out that there were 21 pitchers priced more than \$20 in both leagues last year. So realistically, it's possible to buy two of them.

And still, there is a problem. Last year, on draft day, we spent \$1,955 on Roto pitchers, and as a group they returned—hold on to your hats—\$582!

That's an astounding number. Our pitchers lost \$1,373 after draft day, though of course we don't actually lose that much. We buy pitchers who fail and we release them as quickly as possible. But that staggering number helps point us toward some kind of a solution.

You see, while draft day pitchers earn 30 percent of their draft day price, hitters earn much more. Last year, on draft day, we paid \$4,196 for hitters who earned a total of \$3,684. Hitters earned 88 percent of what we paid for them.

In other words, no real surprise or course, hitters are much more reliable than pitchers.

Now, at this point, it wouldn't surprise me if you said, "Now hold on just a second there fella. How can both groups lose money?" The answer is, the waiver wire. That lost auction day money is actually the stats that were posted by players who weren't bought on auction day. (By the way, the same is true in draft leagues, only the \$ value there is implied by the draft position.)

If hitters are so much more reliable, it makes good sense to invest more in them than pitching. But we've also seen that the best pitchers are about as reliable as hitters. The problem is that we can't load up on them, because if we do we won't have enough money left to buy enough hitting.

It is this conundrum that makes the game challenging.

To get to an answer, let's look at the chart of most profitable pitchers in 2014. (see next page)

One of the first things that jumps out are the earnings of relievers. Dellin Betances, Zach Britton, Joe Smith, Wade Davis, Pat Neshak, and K-Rod all came out of no where and contributed to the success of their fantasy teams last year. But so did a surprising number of starters.

People who paid for Clayton Kershaw, King Felix, Johnny Cueto and Corey Kluber all made a commitment to excellence. They thought they were buying a good arm, as did at least one other owner in their league, but the other starters on this list came in the crapshoot, the end game. Four of these starters weren't even bought in the auction. They were free.

And free (or very cheap) is what you want.

Here are the precepts of putting together a Perfect Pitching Staff.

It is not going to start out perfect. You will have to work to Perfect it.

You can start out with an ace, or two. We used to call them anchors, because they fairly reliably put up good stats. One problem is, if they

PITCHER	PRES	SEPTEMBER	PROFIT
Johnny Cueto	\$13	\$44	\$30
Dellin Betances		\$22	\$22
Zach Britton		\$21	\$21
Jake Arrieta	\$2	\$23	\$21
Collin McHugh		\$20	\$20
Corey Kluber	\$12	\$31	\$19
Joe Smith	\$1	\$19	\$19
Wade Davis	\$1	\$19	\$19
Felix Hernandez	\$27	\$45	\$19
Garrett Richards	\$4	\$23	\$18
Carlos Carrasco	\$2	\$19	\$18
Clayton Kershaw	\$29	\$47	\$18
Tanner Roark	\$5	\$21	\$17
Danny Duffy		\$16	\$16
Pat Neshek		\$16	\$16
Dallas Keuchel		\$15	\$15
Matt Shoemaker		\$15	\$15
Francisco Rodriguez	\$1	\$16	\$15
Mark Melancon	\$5	\$19	\$15

don't, you take a big hit. Which is why, if you have a handle on a cheaper player you think is going to become an ace, buy him. But know that this sort of pitcher is the one most likely to be overbid, because no doubt others agree. Think Danny Salazar last year.

Your goal is to spend as little as possible on pitching, because you want to spend more than anyone else on hitting. So fill in your staff with the types of pitchers who are overlooked.

You cannot reliably scout this type of pitcher. If you could, they would cost more.

Instead, focus on cheapness. Get cheap starters, and more cheap starters. Then get even more cheap starters.

You only have so many slots, but add cheap starters in your reserve rounds, too.

You can play in the Saves game, you can even buy a real closer, but remember to keep your budget below \$80. Ideally, you'll come in closer to \$60, but there is no right number.

That's because you're playing with probability. You want as many wild cards as you can get.

And then, when some wild cards fail (and they will), be active early in the waiver wire. There is lots of evidence that cheap pitchers who start out well early in the season perform better over the course of the season than similar pitchers who start out poorly. Go for the successful ones, dump the bad ones, and hold on for your life.

Of course, these ideas are not wholly original and certainly not secret. And the more fantasy players who adopt them, the harder it will be to gain an edge following them.

But the reality is that there is always going to be free pitching on draft day. So, stay free (or close to free). As soon as you start letting the prices creep up, you lose your edge. ■

STRATEGIES of CHAMPIONS

WHY I DON'T BUY CLOSERS

Derek VanRiper, RotoWire.com

2014 TOUT WARS MIXED AUCTION

15 Team Mixed | \$260 | 5x5 OBP

I like the idea of targeting elite closers, with the goal of minimizing the risk of a potential role change, but owning the likes of Craig Kimbrel or Aroldis Chapman continues to be cost prohibitive in my leagues. My Mixed Tout Wars plan this year was to punt the category on auction day, and use my FAAB resources to find an option (or two) to help in the category at some point during the season. The extra auction money could be used to build a better offense, where I felt I could invest in more reliable five-category production.

Yet even though I missed out on the quality sources of saves that emerged throughout the year—including Francisco Rodriguez, Zach Britton and Mark Melancon—I still managed to win the league. Did I win because I punted saves? Not necessarily. I think I won the league because I avoided having players who returned significantly less value than what I had paid for.

If a top closer like Kimbrel costs \$22 on auction day in a season where he earns \$14, that's \$8 lost in what is supposed to be a good and "safe" investment. Considering that injuries will almost certainly cause owners to post losses on a handful of players, self-inflicted losses incurred by paying the current premium for an elite closer only compound those problems.

If I had pushed Kimbrel to \$23 on auction day to secure 40 saves, there was little hope of doing more than breaking even with him at that price (he earned \$23 and \$22 in 2012 and 2013, respectively). As we learned with his 47-save season, with still great but worse ratios in 2014, it didn't take an overwhelming shift in his core skills to cause a significant drop in value.